

12 Jonathan Elmer, Address to the
Residents of Cumberland County

[*Pennsylvania Journal; and the Weekly Advertiser*, August 28, 1776.]

While the attention of most of his fellow citizens was focused on the war with Great Britain, Jonathan Elmer recognized that the major problem brought about by independence was political rather than military. Ultimately, nationhood would be won in the statehouse, not on the battlefield; civic minded citizens, not soldiers, would determine the fate of the experiment in republicanism. As Elmer correctly pointed out to his Cumberland neighbors, the danger to America lay less in conquest by the British army than in the destruction of the new political order by the corruption, selfishness, and apathy of the people; without a virtuous and patriotic citizenry, independence could never be won.

August 7, 1776

On Wednesday the 7th instant, the Committee of Inspection for the county of Cumberland, in the State of New-Jersey; the officers of the militia, & a great number of other inhabitants, having met at Bridge-Town, went into procession to the Court House, where the *Declaration of Independency*, the *Constitution of New-Jersey*,¹ and *Treason Ordinance*,² were publicly read, and unanimously approved of: These were followed with a spirited address by Dr. ELMER, Chairman of the Committee, after which the peace officers staves, on which were depicted the King's coat of arms, with other ensigns of royalty, were burnt in the street. The whole was conducted with the greatest decency and regularity.

The following being the substance of the before-mentioned address is published at the particular request of the committee and all present.

Gentlemen of the Committee, Officers of the Militia, and Gentlemen Spectators.

From what has now been read you see, the long wished for, but much dreaded period has arrived: in which the connexion between Great-Britain and America is totally dissolved, and these colonies declared free and independent states. As this is an event of the greatest importance, it must afford satisfaction to every intelligent person, to reflect, that it was brought about by unavoidable necessity on our part, and has been conducted with a prudence and moderation, becoming the wisest and best of men.

With the independency of the American states, a new era in politics has commenced. Every consideration respecting propriety or impropriety of a separation from Britain, is now entirely out of the question; and we have now no more to do with the King and people of England, than we have with the King and people of France or Spain. No people under Heaven, were ever favored with a fairer opportunity, of laying a sure foundation for future grandeur and happiness than we. The plan of government established in most states and kingdoms of the world, has been the effect of chance or necessity, ours of sober reason and cool deliberation, our

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future happiness or misery therefore, as a people, will depend entirely upon ourselves. If actuated by principles of virtue and genuine patriotism, we make the welfare of our country the sole aim of all our actions; If we entrust none but persons of abilities and integrity, with the management of our public affairs; If we carefully guard against corruption and undue influence, in the several departments of government; If we are steady and zealous in putting the laws in strict execution; the spirit and principles of our new constitution, which we have just now heard read, may be preserved for a long time; but if faction and party spirit, the destruction of popular governments, take place, anarchy and confusion will soon ensue, and we shall either fall an easy prey to a foreign enemy, or some factious and aspiring *Demagogue*, possessed of popular talents and shining qualities, a *Julius Caesar*,³ or an *Oliver Cromwell*,⁴ will spring up among ourselves, who, taking advantage of our political animosities, will lay violent hands on the government, and sacrifice the liberties of his country to his own ambitious and domineering humour. *God* grant that neither of these may ever be the unhappy fate of this or any of the united states! To prevent which, while we are striving to defend ourselves, against the unjust encroachments of a foreign and unnatural enemy, let us not neglect, to keep a strict and jealous eye, over our own internal police and constitution. Let the fate of Greece, Rome, Carthage and Great-Britain, warn us of our danger; and the loss of liberty in all those states, for want of timely guarding against the introduction of tyranny and usurpation, be a standing admonition to us, to avoid the rock on which they have all shipwrecked.

Let us, as honest citizens and sincere lovers of our country, exert ourselves in the defence of our state and in support of our new constitution; but, while we strive to vindicate the glorious cause of liberty on the one hand, let us on the other hand, carefully guard against running into the contrary extreme, of disorder and licentiousness.

In our present situation, engaged in a bloody and dangerous war with the power of Great-Britain, for the defence of our lives, our liberties, our property, and every thing that is dear and valuable, every member of this state, who enjoys the benefits of its civil government, is absolutely bound, by the immutable law of self-preservation, the laws of God and of society, to assist in protecting and defending it. This is so plain and self-evident a proposition, that I am persuaded, every person here present, makes it the rule of his conduct on all occasions; and consequently, in a time of such imminent danger, will be extremely careful, at our ensuing election, not to entrust any one with the management of our public affairs, who has not, by his vigilance and activity in the cause of liberty, *proved himself* to be a true friend to his country. The success, gentlemen, of our present glorious struggle wholly depends upon this single circumstance. For though the situation and extent of the united states of America, and our numberless internal resources, are sufficient to enable us to bid defiance to all Europe; yet, should we be so careless about our own safety, as to entrust the affairs of our state, while the bayonet is pointed at our breasts, to persons whose conduct discovers them to be enemies to their country, or whose religious principles will not suffer them to lift a hand for our defence,⁵ our ruin will inevitably follow.

As it is impossible for any one, possessed of the spirit of a man who is a friend to the united states, and whose conscience does not furnish him with an excuse, to stand by, an idle spectator, while his country is struggling and bleeding in her own

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necessary defence; all such inactive persons ought therefore to be shunned as enemies or despised as cowards. And as I have reason to believe that many who plead conscience as an excuse are sincere in their pretensions, and as every man's conscience ought to be free from compulsion, this single consideration should restrain us from forcing such into any of the departments of government. For to put such persons, at this time, in places of public trust, is actually to deprive them of liberty of conscience; for we thereby compel them either to betray the trust reposed in them, or to act contrary to the dictates of their own consciences. A dilemma in which, act as they will, their conduct must be criminal. Besides, if we consulted only our own safety, it is plain, that to entrust the affairs of our government, at this juncture, to such people, is as dangerous, as to entrust the management of a ship, in a violent storm, to an infant or an idiot.

As a friend to my country and a lover of liberty, I thought it my duty to address you on this occasion; and having now, as a faithful member of society, discharged my duty I shall leave you to the exercise of your own judgment, and conclude with a request, that you would conduct yourselves this day, in such a manner, as to convince the public that your abhorrence of the cruel and bloody *Nero* of Britain,⁶ and his despicable minions of tyranny and oppression, arises, not from the mere impulse of blind passion and prejudice, but, from sober reason and reflexion; and while we rejoice in being formally emancipated from our haughty and imperious *Task masters*, let us remember, that the final termination of this grand event is not likely to be brought about, without shedding the blood of many of our dear friends and countrymen.

1. See Doc. 6.

2. See Doc. 10.

3. The reference is to Julius Caesar's use of the army to establish himself as the absolute ruler of Rome.

4. The reference is to the action of Cromwell as Lord Protector of England (1653-1658) in transforming the Commonwealth into a virtual military dictatorship.

5. Here, and in the following paragraph, Elmer is calling for political sanctions against Quakers because their religious tenets forbade active military or political participation in the revolution. For a further discussion of the plight of Quakers during the war, see Sec. XI, Docs. 10 and 11.

6. The comparison is between Claudius Nero Caesar, who supposedly "fiddled" while Rome burned in 64 A.D. but was later suspected of having set the fire himself, and George III, who similarly blamed conspirators for the American rebellion when the revolt allegedly stemmed from his indifference to colonial interests.